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The later prehistory of the southern Levant: issues of practice and context

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1. Introduction

The workshop published here was intended to improve our understanding of the developments during the 6th through the mid-4th millennia BC. Accordingly, it was focused upon two key transitions. The first, the transition from the final phase of the Neolithic to the early phase of the Chalcolithic, is now generally dated to the early 5th millennium cal BC. The second, that from the Chalcolithic to the initial phases of the Early Bronze Age falls in the early centuries of the 4th millennium BC. The intervening period is occupied by a developed phase of the Chalcolithic often termed the “Ghassulian Culture” (Bourke 2008, for a recent summary). The second transition has recently been termed the “End of Prehistory” (Joffe *et al.* 2001), and there is now a range of evidence which suggests that Early Bronze Age communities were organized along rather different lines from their predecessors (Philip 2008).

Participants were asked to provide ways to move beyond traditional debates, and ask new questions concerning developments in the 5th and 4th millennia cal BC. The editors have invited me to review the extent to which these hopes have come to fruition, and to consider the range of ideas that have emerged from discussion. I will also consider areas within which progress is less apparent, and make some suggestions as to why this might be. In addition, I will try to place the periods concerned, and some of the issues raised by the papers in this volume, in a wider context. In pursuing this I will make some brief comparisons between work on the later prehistory of the southern Levant and research on earlier and later periods in the region, and with the current research on prehistoric societies elsewhere in the Middle East. I will also suggest that we might usefully consider new types of narrative, touch upon issues arising from current archaeological practice, and possibilities apparent from current developments in the wider field of prehistoric archaeology.

The later prehistory of the southern Levant: regional context and disciplinary impact

The discovery shortly after World War II of convincing evidence for early agricultural settlements at sites such as Jarmo and Jericho placed near eastern prehistory firmly within a global-scale narrative, that of the emergence of agriculture. Since then, the growing quantity and quality of the primary

evidence for early sedentary communities in the southern Levant (e.g. Bar Yosef and Gopher 1997; Byrd 2005; Finlayson and Mithen (eds) 2007; Kenyon and Holland 1981, 1982, 1983), and the existence of an ample supply of accessible summary literature (Bar Yosef and Meadow 1995; Kuijt ed. 2000; Rollefson 2001; Simmons 2007) has ensured the region's place in global prehistories (Clark 1977; Mithen 2003; Scarre ed. 2005).

The region's later prehistory has received far less attention. In contrast to extensive discussion of Aceramic Neolithic communities, the ceramic Neolithic does not feature in the accounts of Mithen (2003) or Watkins (2005), both of which are set within major volumes intended to provide a global overview. In practice, as far as general accounts are concerned, discussion of the later prehistory of the Middle East has traditionally been dominated by the Mesopotamian evidence. This trend is exemplified by Matthews (2005) whose account of the "rise of civilization in southwest Asia", is in-effect a follow-on to that of that of Watkins (2005) mentioned above, yet makes no mention of the Levant prior to the Bronze Age. This is no real surprise given the number of substantial region/period overviews of the Mesopotamian evidence published in recent years (e.g. Algaze 2004; 2008; Rothman ed. 2001; 2004; Pollock 1999; Charvát 2002; Matthews 2000, 2003). Collectively, these accounts provide a rich source of information, much of which has been arranged around a series of important themes (e.g. the development of complex societies, the growth of bureaucracy, urbanization, the scale and form of long-distance contact) which allow the mass of data to be arranged in a comprehensible manner. In addition, the last two or three years have seen the publication of thematic volumes addressing topics such as prehistoric ceramics (Nieuwenhuyse 2007) and textiles (Breniquet 2008). This material has contributed greatly to the impact that Mesopotamian archaeology has had in shaping the understanding of the development of complex societies among the wider subject community.

The later prehistory of the Levant was, of course, accorded more detailed discussion by Mellaart (1975, 227-243). However, in keeping with the aims of this still-fundamental text, his discussion was largely focused upon the description of material assemblages, their space-time systematics and generalised consideration of regional interaction. Such dedicated volumes are rare, however, and the later prehistory of the southern Levant has more often been covered in multi-period regional accounts, which generally prioritize the evidence for the 2nd and 1st millennia BC. The latter is, of course, of interest to a wide audience including: Biblical scholars, Egyptian archaeologists, ancient historians and specialists in the ancient Aegean and Mediterranean. The very titles of many such volumes (Kenyon [1979]; Mazar [1990]; Ben Tor (ed.) [1992]; Levy (ed.) [1995]), which reverberate with terms such as "Holy Land", "Land of Israel", and "Bible" or "Biblical" serve to cast the later prehistory of the region as a kind of extended prologue, something to be covered almost through a sense of obligation.

Why does the evidence from the southern Levant "drop out" of wider narratives towards the end of the Aceramic Neolithic? Admittedly Mesopotamia covers a much larger area and there have been numerous

research projects working there in recent decades. However, the southern Levant is a well-studied region, and while excavations have been fewer in total than in Mesopotamia, they are more densely distributed across the landscape, and the material is generally more accessible for study. Moreover, I would suggest that in terms of data, for example the final publication of recent field projects (e.g. Barker *et al.* 2008; Garfinkel and Miller 2002; Garfinkel and Dag 2008; Scheftelowitz and Oren 2004; van den Brink and Gophna 2005), and the availability of palaeoeconomic and paleoenvironmental data, the Levant is quite well served (e.g. Hill 2006; Hunt *et al.* 2007; Kuijt *et al.* 2007; Rosen 2006). Despite this, however, the evidence from the region has played relatively little part in wider debates.

An obvious answer is that as far as the southern Levant is concerned the Ceramic Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods fall between what have been arguably the two main foci of archaeological research in recent years. The first of these, early sedentism and the domestication of plants and animals, with all its implications for social and economic organization, is concerned primarily with the study of Aceramic Neolithic societies, and is thus focused upon the 7th millennium cal BC and earlier. The second, the development of complex societies, early states and urbanism, has tended to focus on the 4th and 3rd millennia BC, with discussion of the evidence from earlier periods focused upon the perceived south and north Mesopotamian “cores”.

But the gap is not only a temporal one. Researchers working on early sedentary communities and those studying complex societies have each created, not just a dense network of data, but a set of theories and concepts through which debate has been conducted, and themes around which the mass of evidence can be organized. Through this process our understanding of these periods has been modified substantially in recent decades. However, the period in-between, which is the subject of this volume, appears to lack a group of unifying themes of the kinds which provide strong research cores for these other areas. Thus, to some extent it sits within an intellectual “gap” between these lively fields of debate, and as the editors observe, “scholarly discussion has often prioritized the definition and redefinition of “archaeological cultures”, and matters of chronology and terminology”. In this light it is telling that the “chiefdom” concept, first introduced to discussions of Levantine prehistoric societies more than twenty years ago (Levy 1986) still remains the closest thing to an anthropological framework in common usage.

Nomenclature

The terminology used for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods is a case in point. Many of the key themes such as domestication, and the social and conceptual implications of sedentism can usefully be investigated across extensive territories (Colledge *et al.* 2005; Colledge and Conolly 2007; Hodder 2007; Larson *et al.* 2007; Watkins 2004). Accordingly, the main phase terminologies associated with the Aceramic Neolithic are applied Levant-wide despite the existence of regional distinctions in material culture (e.g. Kozłowski and Aurenche 2005). Equally, for the Early Bronze Age a set of successive chronological phases numbered EBA I-IV is employed across the southern Levant (except for in the arid zones – Rosen [this volume]), and less

consistently in south and west Syria (compare Braemer [2002; 10, Tab.3] and Mazzoni [2002] with Akkermans and Schwarz [2003, 215, 236]).

However, in the case of the Ceramic Neolithic and Chalcolithic of the southern Levant, the material has traditionally been discussed in terms of a number of chrono-stratigraphic units defined on the basis of material culture. These are generally equated with traditional “archaeological cultures”, and remain at the heart of even recent overviews, most of which are substantially devoted to their characterization and the clarification of their chronological relationships (Garfinkel 1993; Gopher 1995; Gopher & Gophna 1993; Gilead this volume). From these accounts it is apparent that these cultures provide not only the basic organizational structure for the data, but also a key element of the research vocabulary.

2. The “Archaeological Culture” as a mode of analysis

From the standpoint of a researcher working in a British university, one of the most striking elements of the papers in this volume is the extent to which a normative or essentialist notion of the “Archaeological Culture” (Childe 1956, 123) continues to play a central role in discussion. Some papers seek to identify and refine archaeological cultures (e.g. Gilead, Kafafi this volume), others refer to “type-fossils” as characteristic of a particular chronological or cultural phase (Milevski *et al.* this volume), while some cite population movements as explanations for the appearance of new material (Golani and Nagar this volume). All of these are consistent with classic culture-historical practice, and while some claim to conceive of cultures mainly as units for organizing the data, many contributors at least implicitly follow Childe (1933, 198) who stated that, “Culture is a social heritage; it corresponds to a community sharing common traditions, common institutions and a common way of life”. Many contributions (e.g. Milevski *et al.*, Gilead, Roux *et al.*; Rosen this volume) refer less directly to Childe than to Clarke’s (Clarke 1978, 247) reformulation of the concept of the archaeological culture, which allowed for material culture distributions which were overlapping but not congruent. However, the widely recognized problems with the whole concept of the archaeological culture (Trigger 1968, 530; also see Shennan 1994, 5-14, for a more recent summary of critiques, with references) go largely unremarked.

As Trigger (1978, 86) has pointed out, the culture-historical approach grew out of the need to classify the space-time variability that was apparent within the archaeological record, a statement consistent with the views of several contributors. The initial phase of prehistoric research in the Middle East brought to light a past for which no ready interpretational framework existed (Wengrow 2006, 190), and which was therefore partly defined by the absence of a range of features (e.g. writing, cities), which were readily observed among later societies in the region. Given this situation it is no surprise that scholars adopted the standard disciplinary practices of the mid-20th century AD (see below).

Despite its limitations culture history continues to be the preferred analytical framework within many regional traditions (Ucko 1995, 5), suggesting that it

produces outcomes sufficiently useful to make it “fit for purpose” in the eyes of many users. However, Ucko (1995, 11) also notes that its persistence cannot be attributed to the same reasons in each case. Among the reasons he lists are: a focus upon the collection, organizing and ordering of data; a desire to create models of the past that support present-day identity claims or which provide “unproblematic” narratives for those seeking to write a national “prehistory”; a general suspicion of theory. The present account will, hopefully begin to explore the particular reasons for its persistence in the southern Levant. Reading Gilead’s (this volume) contribution one might suspect that a desire to retain the place of artefact data at the very centre of analysis has played an important part.

Cultures as legacy

In this particular case, I would suggest that the tenacity of “cultures” within the accounts of the Ceramic Neolithic and Chalcolithic results from a combination of factors. Firstly, at the time when pioneering scholars such as Stekelis (1950-51; 1972), de Vaux (1970, 1971), Perrot (1968) and Kenyon (1960) were laying the foundations of our knowledge of the later prehistory of the Levant, the concept of the “archaeological culture” was current within archaeology, and widely employed by authorities such as Childe (Rowan and Lovell with further references). In the Middle East generally, prehistory was a relatively late addition to an archaeological tradition that had taken shape around the evidence - tombs, palaces and tablets - of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia (Wengrow 2006, 189). This characterization is also apt for the situation in southern Levant, where a relatively small group of prehistorians worked within a disciplinary field dominated by scholars dealing with the archaeology of the Bronze and Iron Ages. For the latter, the notion of bounded archaeological cultures appeared compatible with a historical narrative expressed largely in terms of the rise and fall of regional and “ethnic” polities, and whose reconstructions sought to characterise broad regional phenomena. In this situation, a normative approach to the material evidence appeared eminently suitable.

It should be no surprise then that material culture was used to define chrono-stratigraphic groups which were generally equated with “archaeological cultures”, and that following Childe (e.g. 1956, 135) these were taken as representative of past societies. In addition, a particularly striking feature of later prehistoric material assemblages in the region was pottery, a body of material which offers real scope for the incorporation of variability, and so lends itself very well to classification on stylistic grounds. This was, of course, the very practice which underlay the definition of cultural units. However, as Anfinset *et al.* (this volume) observe, the focus on pottery may have led scholars to neglect other aspects of the evidence.

Many of the basic culture-groups such as the Yarmoukian (Stekelis 1950-51, 1972), Wadi Rabah (Kaplan 1958a, 1958b) and the Ghassulian (Neuville 1930) entered the discussion many decades ago, and were defined on the basis of what is now best termed “legacy data”. That is, material much of which is now viewed as unreliable for reasons such as: suspect stratigraphy, selective reporting of finds, a focus on painted ceramics to the neglect of

undecorated material, inadequate publication, weak stratigraphic or chronological control. It should come as no surprise therefore, that despite a continuing emphasis on the role of ceramic typology, it has not always been easy to incorporate more recent evidence within older frameworks. Thus attempts during the 1980s by Hanbury-Tenison (1986), and by Helms (1987, also in Betts ed. 1992) to demonstrate continuity across the Chalcolithic-EB transition, were ultimately frustrated, not only by inadequacies in the dataset, but by the fact that the organizational units which provided the vocabulary for debate were themselves inextricably bound to existing interpretations.

Aspects of current practice

Scholars have continued to define new “cultures” such as the Besorian (Gilead 2007) and the “Qatifian” (Goren 1990), although the latter has not found universal acceptance (Bourke 2007, 29). Moreover, the contributions to this volume highlight the fact that the Wadi Rabah Culture, while defined by Kaplan (1958a, 1958b) half a century ago, and still prominent in the literature, has proved difficult to discuss in a way that is acceptable to the research community as whole. Nor do the various “cultures” comprise units that are directly comparable. Some, the “Ghassulian” for example, are deemed to embrace sites and phases across much of the southern Levant, while others, such as the Besorian (Gilead 2007) or the recently proposed “Esurian” (Yannai 2006, 275) are more confined in both space and time. The resulting mosaic of entities and variants presents scholars with a framework that is very different from that provided by the overarching regional units identified in both earlier and later periods.

Also relevant is Rosen’s (this volume) observation that arid zone cultures, previously defined on the basis of distinct chipped stone “industries” may well be artefacts of particular techniques of lithic analysis. He further observes that, while the “Timnian” of the Negev can be said to conform to Clarke’s (1978) definition of an “archaeological culture”, the two ends of this very long temporal trajectory are quite different, and there is no reason to assume the maintenance of a single distinct “Timnian” identity throughout.

Clearly the widespread retention of the culture concept does pose certain problems. The relevant issues have been usefully summarized by Johnson (1999, 16-17), who notes that when artefacts are taken to express cultural norms, this leads to the definition of groups of an idealized nature. Firstly, the resulting focus upon difference emphasizes the peculiarities of individual cultures, rendering it hard to identify and discuss elements that are shared between cultures. Secondly, normative cultures tend to be viewed as relatively stable entities, and so when a period of time is presented as a succession of cultures, it can be hard to discuss change and transition, except in terms of the replacement of one unit by another.

This second issue is particularly apparent in articles which focus upon demonstrating the differences between cultural groups (e.g. Gilead 2007; this volume), and is implicit in others. One result, as Johnson (1999, 16-17) observes, is to create the kind of poorly-defined transitional periods that represent a major focus of this volume. While often no more than the

boundary zone between two arbitrarily-defined, and highly abstracted cultural units, such “transitions” are often viewed as periods of instability and rapid change. However, this view has tended to reduce the visibility of change **within** “better-defined” periods, a point recently made by Campbell (2007) with respect to the archaeological units commonly used in discussions of Mesopotamian prehistory.

The importance of type-sites to the definition of “cultures” is underscored by the use of nomenclature such as Ghassul(ian), Timna(in) and Besor(ian). However, the role of type-sites in setting the expectations of a later prehistoric “culture” is crucial. In fact, some are poorly dated, some were poorly excavated or published, while others produced quite small datasets, with the resulting material cultural entities created by the addition of supposedly representative material from yet other sites (for further discussion see Clarke *et al.* [2007, 14]). Campbell and Fletcher (in press) have argued recently for Neolithic North Mesopotamia that “a very restricted group of classic type sites in Iraq fundamentally influenced the chronological divisions across northern Mesopotamia -----”. If we accept that our traditional chronological structure is created by the slightly random choice of the initial range of excavated sites, then there is at least a possibility that questions which are generated by that structure may be misleading”. In this light, Lovell’s (2001, 50) suggestion that Teleilat Ghassul, type-site for the supposedly well-defined Ghassulian, may itself be atypical, might suggest that we would do well to review some of our core assumptions.

Anfinset *et al.* (this volume) highlight another problem when they note that practice in the southern Levant generally conforms to what Dobres (1999, 13) terms “normative research”, in that site-specific patterns of artefact variability are employed to describe ways of life on a regional scale. This process is facilitated by the prevalence of “cultures” which act as an intermediary “black box” allowing analysis to jump from the detailed material culture record to more generalising statements. Two particular outcomes of this process are of concern. Firstly, by becoming “cultures”, what were ostensibly classificatory entities are treated akin to active agents, and become the building blocks around which narratives are constructed (Pluciennik 1999, 660). Secondly, by framing our narratives around high-level abstractions, we risk losing sight of the variability present within the primary data.

The result has been that our organizational units have come to shape, not only our terminology, but scholarly expectations, the very questions asked by researchers, and the narrative structures deployed in writing accounts of Levantine prehistory. However, if, as Burton and Levy (this volume) argue, “individual communities typically cycle through asynchronous phases of establishment, expansion and decline”, and excavations tend to produce more data from some occupational phases than others, then the culture model risks creating macroscale narratives through the combination of evidence drawn from quite different stages of the developmental trajectories of individual sites.

While the foregoing suggests that interpretation has in many respects adhered to traditional modes, the field of Levantine prehistory was certainly

open to external influences and witnessed a substantial uptake of new methodological developments such as geophysical survey, and palaeo-environmental investigations. It is useful that we try to understand how this situation came about, and why approaches currently favoured in Americanist archaeology, or the more theoretical end of European and Mediterranean prehistory, perhaps exemplified by the *European Journal of Archaeology* or the *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* appear to have had a limited impact in the region. Of course, a full-scale analysis of the issue lies beyond the scope of the present paper, so I will restrict myself to making a few specific observations.

Some pointers might be drawn from a recent paper by Bernbeck and Pollock (2004, 338-340) who have argued that two distinct research traditions can be distinguished among foreign archaeologists working in the Middle East. The first which they term “Europeanist”, is characterized by a close interest in historical problems and often finds expression through long-term projects based upon a single site or region. Such approaches accept that knowledge is built incrementally, and that the accumulation of evidence is itself of value, even if a considerable amount of this may appear of limited immediate use. The second tradition, which they term “Americanist” (perhaps better termed “Anglo-Saxon” as it applies also to projects funded from British, Canadian and Australian sources), is more closely allied to the social sciences. Research tends to be problem-orientated, with an interest in processes, or structures. Importantly, data collection is designed to address specific research questions, often of a type likely to be relevant to a range of researchers, including an audience beyond others working in that specific sub-discipline or region. Fieldwork projects are often of limited duration, more focused, and the results are expected to have an impact upon the field which is apparent within a limited timescale

Using the terms of Bernbeck and Pollock (2004, 340) the approaches favoured by many archaeological projects in the region, including locally-based and those run in collaboration with overseas institutions, are aligned with the “Europeanist” model. Its historical orientation fits well with local agendas, while researchers involved in long-term field projects are well positioned to gain a genuinely detailed knowledge of the regional material culture: the high priority assigned to long-term excavations at major Bronze and Iron Age tell sites is a case in point. However, the kind of theoretical literature noted above, while integral to “Anglo-Saxon” research frameworks, is perhaps of less obvious value to scholars working within traditions where priorities differ.

Cultures and transitional periods

Some contributors (e.g. Milevski *et al.* this volume) appear to conceive of periods as comprising distinct entities, characterised, if not by cultural norms, then by specific socio-economic structures as a result of which material cultural preferences are shaped. Gilead’s remark (this volume) that the transition between “Besorian” and “Ghassulian” is marked by “a profound technological, typological and aesthetic change” provides a good illustration. Clearly if the data is organized into cultures, then the change detectable within

the material record must be understood as that between cultures, which are seen as periods of stasis separated by “transitions”, for example that from the Chalcolithic to the EB I period. These are exactly the problems raised by Johnson (1999, 16-17). Moreover, groups of material that appear to share elements of both earlier and later cultures, and to thus conflict with expectations, can be dismissed as “mixed”.

However, Braun (this volume) and van den Brink (this volume) have now documented sufficient elements of continuity between the Late Chalcolithic and early EB I to show that the assemblage generally understood as “early EB I” took shape gradually during the earlier part of the 4th millennium cal BC. Moreover, those features which were to become most distinctive of the period can be shown to have appeared at slightly different temporal points in the process. This suggests that rather than seeing one culture as replacing another, we would do better to view the changes detectable in the archaeological record as evidence for complex, multidimensional transformations of the relationship between people, and with their environment and a range of material resources. This suggestion builds upon the idea that, “culture” is not fixed, but is constantly being brought into existence through the lived performance of daily practice, much of which is mediated through the use of material objects (DeMarrais *et al.* 1996).

Returning to the matter of the Chalcolithic-EBA transition, it is interesting that the issue is likely to be resolved, not through discussion and debate, but by acquisition of new data, in particular from the early and mid 4th millennium cal BC deposits at sites such as Ashkelon Afridar and Mod’in (Braun and Gophna 2004; Braun this volume; van den Brink this volume). Van den Brink (this volume) notes that the various phases of occupation at individual sites provide merely synchronic snap-shots of slightly different points within a continuum of development. It should be obvious therefore, that models which seek to assign such snapshots to one or other of a limited number of large-scale chrono-stratigraphic units, will reduce the explanatory potential of the evidence by replacing the continuity present in the data with a break created by the model itself.

That said, while the evidence in favour of gradual change appears increasingly plausible, in order to demonstrate such changes convincingly we need to be more explicit about the nature of the contexts from which key material derives. Researchers must also be sensitive to the degree to which residual material may complicate the situation on sites with long occupational sequences (Peltenburg *et al.* 2003, 258). Thus, while excavation reports now increasingly include an appendix containing descriptions of the individual contexts or loci, it is not always clear to what extent this evidence has informed the discussion of artefactual data, which is all too often still presented by phase or stratum, rather than by individual deposit.

Chronology and the use of radiometric dating

The region / period overviews of the late 20th century (e.g. Gopher and Gophna 1995; Hanbury-Tenison 1986; Stager 1992) were held back by the lack of a *reliable* absolute chronology. However, a growing corpus of good

radiometric dates linked to sound stratigraphic sequences at sites such as Teleilat Ghassul (Bourke 2007, 26); Wadi Ziqlab (Banning 2007a), Tell Abu Hamid (Lovell *et al.* 2007, 57-59) and sites in the Wadi Beersheba (Burton and Levy this volume) means that the absolute chronology of the Ceramic Neolithic and Chalcolithic is now much clearer than was the case even a decade ago.

Radiometric evidence now indicates that the material termed Chalcolithic is unlikely to continue beyond 3800 cal BC (Bourke *et al.* 2004; Burton and Levy 2001; Burton and Levy this volume), and that the material assemblages taken to characterize the initial phase of the Early Bronze I period were in use by 36-3500 cal BC at Afridar (Segal and Carmi 2004, 119-120, Braun and Gophna 2004, 220-224), and Tell esh-Shuna (Bronk-Ramsey *et al.* 2002, 83-84). Rosen (this volume) has shown, using radiocarbon evidence, that various elements traditionally lumped under the term “Timnian” appeared at different times. Thus he demonstrates not only the extent of diachronic variability within steppe lithic assemblages, but also the contemporaneity of quite distinct material culture assemblages in the Mediterranean and steppe zones. We may soon be able to test Bourke’s (2007, 28) suggestion that regions within the Mediterranean zone might also have developed at rather different speeds.

However, despite recent discussion (Banning 2007b), there are substantial variations in the ways in which radiocarbon dates are used by contributors. It is important that scholars are aware of problems inherent in the manipulation and grouping of radiometric dates, if we are to exploit the full potential of the growing date-corpus. When dealing with groups of dates we should note the cautionary remarks of Bronk-Ramsey (2005) to the effect that “Combination of dates should clearly only be carried out if there is good reason to assume that the events being dated all occurred within a short period (“short” here implies small in comparison to the errors associated with the dating methods)”. The danger inherent in averaging dates, in particular when done without a clear understanding of the chronological and contextual relationships between the various samples, has been well illustrated by Millard and Wilkinson (1999). Given the nature of averaging as a procedure, it is unsurprising that the outcome is diagrams which show the dates for each archaeological culture forming a distinct cluster, clearly separated from the dates from earlier and later cultures (e.g. Gilead, this volume, [Figure 2.3](#)). In fact, the apparently stable bounded entities which emerge are simply a product of the methods used, as the averaging procedure does to dates what the creation of normative cultures does to artefactual data. Such a procedure can hardly stand as a validation of the existence of cultures.

Related criticisms can be levelled at the treatment of dates by Shugar and Gohm (this volume). Radiocarbon dates should only be combined if (a) there is some *a priori* reason to believe that they represent the same point in time, and (b) they are statistically indistinguishable. The fact that dates satisfy condition (b) is not sufficient in itself to justify this procedure. The method of assigning sites to two-hundred year sub-periods on the basis of radiocarbon

dates also appears problematic (Shugar and Gohm, this volume [Table 10.2](#)). The calibrated date is a probability distribution and the range (whether expressed at one or two sigma) is simply not a reliable means of deciding which of the bicenturies it is most likely to belong to. For example, RTA-4506 the first date in Shugar and Gohm's [Table 10.4](#) (this volume), when calibrated has a 95% range of 3630 to 3368 BCE, and so apparently a near-equal split of 130 years before 3500 and 132 years after 3500. However, the probability plot shows that around two-thirds of the probability falls after 3500 cal BC. Moreover, many of these sites are complex and long-lived and even when dateable material is closely associated with metal artefacts, this would date not their production and use, but their final deposition.

Banning *et al.* (this volume) demonstrate, using a Bayesian approach (Buck *et al.* 1996; Philip and Millard 2000), how one might undertake a sophisticated diachronic study of localised developments using less than ideal datasets. In a similar way Banning (2007a) has used Bayesian analysis of radiocarbon dates to establish the chronological positions of a variety of archaeological “entities” including both traditional “cultures” and individual phases at specific sites, some of which had previously proved hard to place on material culture grounds alone. The construction of chronologies on the basis of radiometric dates, rather than through claimed material culture parallels, renders it possible to establish the temporal relationships between individual stratigraphic units, without the circularity inherent in typology-based schemes. The recognition of this fact is the first step towards moving discussion away from pre-determined chrono-stratigraphic blocks, and towards viewing the evidence from individual sites and regions in all its complexity and contradiction. Bayesian analyses are an invaluable aid to the systematic, comparative analyses of archaeological evidence at the inter-site scale, that is necessary if we wish to write macroscale accounts without recourse to traditional “cultures”.

Of particular value will be the opportunity of examining separately the chronological development of different components of activity and material culture. This will allow us to assess whether changes in different fields of action were genuinely contemporary, and whether these might indeed form closely-linked “clusters” of activity. It will also allow us to investigate the degree of variability between synchronous communities, the significance of differential rates of development around the region, and the relative timing of different communities’ decisions regarding specific technical or material innovations. In effect, it will allow us to ask more sophisticated questions by accessing a richer and more complex range of archaeological evidence.

3. Towards an alternative framework

My own view is that we need to move away from working with pre-defined chrono-stratigraphic units, and focus attention on the transformation of material culture through human action. However, this is best argued through a consideration of the possible value of alternative approaches to the south Levantine dataset. In this context, it is possible to identify a number of issues, which if examined in detail, might provide rather more finely textured interpretations.

Environment and subsistence practices, while studied and reported, have not always been well integrated with the wider discussion of community structure, organization and reproduction. It is striking, for example, that few of the contributors (but see Roux *et al.* this volume) have explored the implications for human activity of recent environmental evidence (Brooks 2006; Robinson *et al.* 2006; Rosen 2006). Of course, archaeologists should be wary of resorting to environmental determinism, but Rosen (this volume) demonstrates that while the environment sets certain constraints upon the range of behavioural possibilities consistent with sustainability, the record of human groups in the arid zone is not lacking in internal variability. In practice, a community's response to an environmental threat such as drought, or to a new opportunity such as the availability of copper tools, will almost certainly be contingent upon a set of very localised concerns, including the way that the threat is perceived (e.g. as a regular, if unfortunate, event, as opposed to, say, an act of divine retribution), and the degree to which the responses available are attractive to the community's main internal groupings. Consequently, there may be considerable diversity in the form and timing of different communities' responses to a particular opportunity or threat.

The very divergence of these responses may be an important driver of change. Some communities within a region might respond to a period of localised drought by changing cropping patterns or investing in improved water management technology, some might choose to retain their traditional ways and adjust population levels to reduced yields, while others might fission, forming smaller groups and adopting a more extensive resource procurement strategy. While there may be several workable responses to such a challenge, the particular route taken is likely to involve changes in the nature of the relationships of the community concerned with the landscape. Moreover, when the period of drought ended, the members of the various communities might find that as a result of their divergent strategies, they were in rather different positions with respect to their levels of access to key resources.

The relevance of the above is that during the 6th through 4th millennia cal BC, communities in the southern Levant had to engage with a range of new opportunities, any one of which had the potential to cascade change through society. These included: the cultivation of olives and the production of olive oil (Lovell 2008 for a recent overview), the increasing adoption of woollen textiles *via* the appearance of wool-bearing sheep (Grigson 2006; Levy *et al.* 2006), the increasing availability of copper (Golden *et al.* 2001; Shugar 2001) and the domestication of the donkey (Grigson 1995; 2006, 224). The period also saw the appearance of both substantial individual settlements such as Teleilat Ghassul, and settlement concentrations, for example that along the Wadi Beersheba (see Bourke 2008, 114-117).

If we set aside cultures and instead imagine a mosaic of communities, each grappling with a complex range of possibilities, we might think that the kinds of development noted above would form useful entry points for the investigation of change. By way of an example it seems reasonable to

enquire what the demonstrable changes in settlement size and subsistence regimes might have meant for the relationship between people, animals and land? Changes in crops and herd structures would surely imply changes in the valuation of different tracts of terrain, and in patterns of access to resources such as land and water a point made recently by Philip (2003) with respect to changes in the economy detectable during the later 4th millennium cal BC.

Another obvious gap is in the appreciation of the relationship between people and livestock in shaping past societies. In addition to their obvious role within food systems, domestic animals provide an important link between human groups at both intra and inter-community scales. Robb (2004, 135-6) makes the interesting point that in prehistoric communities the herd of domestic livestock controlled by many individual households would have been too small to be demographically viable over the long-term, necessitating a larger biological herd comprised of various smaller social herds, with livestock circulating between households. This situation would have been especially pronounced in the case of resource intensive species such as cattle, animals which are present at many sites in the southern Levant, albeit in varying proportions. Thus cattle may have played an important role in social relations, well beyond their apparent value for subsistence and traction.

In a related issue, scholars have not really considered the social and political implications of evidence pointing to the very variable role of pig as a source of meat at Chalcolithic and EB I sites (Anfinset *et al.* this volume; Croft 1994; Grigson 1995, 254-255). Domestic pigs tend to live close to a settlement, unlike caprines which are amenable to being herding across the landscape. Thus the contrast between the manner in which each species is best managed, and the relationship between herding practices and matters of territory and distance may have given them very different social values, perhaps even ideological characteristics. These processes are likely to have contributed alongside local environmental affordances, to the shaping of social attitudes to meat consumption within different communities. If the great predominance of caprine remains and virtual absence of pig bone in what appear to be EB I cultic deposits at Megiddo (Wapnish and Hesse 2000), are indicative of the dietary preferences of the gods, one might wonder what this meant for the status of those communities wherein pig-raising and pork consumption featured strongly. A discussion along these lines opens-up a range of interesting ways to integrate studies of environment and economy with matters of status and ideology among past communities.

Scales of analysis and the role of communities

While the distinctive nature of the Chalcolithic material culture attested in the Jaulan is now well documented (Epstein 1998), and its place as one of several regional Chalcolithic variants widely remarked (Gonen 1992; Levy 1995; Kerner 2001), the significance of this difference has been less thoroughly explored. If for example, Chalcolithic copper objects circulated in the context of some kind of prestige-goods system (Kerner 2001; Levy 1986; 1995), then the virtual absence of such artefacts from excavated settlements

in the Jaulan (Epstein 1998) might suggest that that these communities differed markedly from contemporary societies elsewhere in the region, both internally, and in the way in which extra-regional relationships were conducted. To echo the work of John Barrett (1994) on prehistoric communities in Britain, we might ask what the evidence can tell us about the way in which communities in the Jaulan responded to the challenges posed to them by the particular natural and social environment of their upland landscape, how this compared with the behaviour of contemporary groups in the various lowland environments, and how communities related to each other. We would also wish to understand the time-trajectories of individual communities in terms of their changing relationship with the natural and material world. In this way we may begin to distinguish between elements of change that were constituted at a local level, and those which were spatially more extensive.

When “cultures” become the actors, as in many macroscale narratives (Pluciennik 1999, 660), then the story of individual communities becomes part of, and is effectively submerged within, a common narrative. As our data takes the form of interlinked sets of evidence generally drawn from individual space-time loci, it seems almost perverse to abandon specifics at an early stage in the process of interpretation. Pluciennik (1999) argues that the source material necessary for the construction of microscale narratives is best sought at the level of individual sites [or occupational phases], and that this approach requires us to emphasize the historically specific, and thus investigate the small-scale localised events from which larger patterns might be constructed. Thus, if our narrative framework and analyses are set exclusively at the macroscale, then our interpretations will be restricted to this scale. If, however, we wish to produce more nuanced narratives, developed from the bottom-up, we need to think in terms not of “cultures”, but of a mosaic of communities, each grappling with a complex range of possibilities. These communities would have existed within variably-composed local clusters, linked by dense, routine interaction, but also a multi-scale set of more dispersed networks (in both spatial and temporal terms), mediated through a complex range of persons and materials.

An example of such an approach is that of Hodder (2006) at Çatalhöyük, who provides a richly textured account of an individual community in its own terms with only modest reference to contemporary sites. Core to his interpretative framework is the concept of agency. In fact, Barrett (2000, 63) has suggested that narratives which mark the passing of time without referring to agency work at a level of abstraction in which “economic processes operate without labour, ideologies arise without the struggle to maintain belief”. In practice, few sites excavated in the southern Levant have benefited from either the exceptional preservation encountered at Çatalhöyük, or the level of support required to facilitate the scale and highly intensive nature of that particular excavation.

However, that said, I am not certain that current archaeological practice in the region is suited to such high-density analysis, although the southern Levant is far from unique in this case. In fact, a recent overview of practice in British

prehistory (Jones 2002, 51) has pinpointed a number of issues which appear germane to the southern Levant. Among other things, Jones observes that it is the normal practice in excavation reports for stratigraphy, architecture and the various classes of finds to be presented in separate chapters: these are necessarily often the work of different specialists, who may devote much effort to reviewing parallels from other sites. However, detailed spatial and contextual analysis at the site level is less common. The result is that the various facets of the artefactual data from a particular project are not necessarily reviewed within a site-specific framework. Rather, they are dislocated from their contexts, to become artefacts in the abstract, with analysis generally taking the form of comparison with “related” objects recovered from a selection of sites covering relatively extensive intervals of time and space. This practice is a key element in facilitating “normative research” and is linked to the perceived need to produce the kind of generalising, macroscale accounts, in which “archaeological cultures” feature prominently. The outcome, however, is that artefact patterning at a regional-scale may be discussed without a clear understanding of the detailed contextualization of the material at individual sites.

Clearly these practices are historically contingent and reflect the expectations of the intellectual environment within which they were formed. However, the way in which we organize and present our data impacts upon the way in which archaeology can be “written” at a synthetic level, for example by rendering some forms of interpretation relatively straightforward (e.g. inter-site or regional ceramic comparisons), but making other modes of analysis more difficult to develop.

In the case of the southern Levant, we lack knowledge on some very basic topics – for example the social and economic implications of the palpable differentiation of communities by size, function and local subsistence possibilities. Such investigations might be viewed as the prime function of long-term research excavations such as those at Gilat (Levy *et al.* 2006), Teleilat Ghassul (Bourke 2002, 2007), Shiqmim (Levy 1987) or Sha’ar ha-Golan (Garfinkel and Miller 2002) all of which have provided large quantities of high quality evidence. Yet, as Rowan and Lovell (this volume) observe, some of the most important data to emerge in recent years has come from salvage excavations such as Afridar (Braun and Gophan 2004), Modin (van den Brink this volume), Yiftahel (Braun 1997) and Peqi’in (Gal *et al.* 1997). The fact that new research questions are being addressed through salvage archaeology has parallels in contemporary Britain. There, fieldwork in lowland landscapes in response to the activities of developers, has highlighted the scale of prehistoric settlement away from the areas traditionally favoured by long-term research projects (Bradley 2007). In the case of the Levant, the growing impact of the evidence from salvage projects might indicate that the questions which appeal to research funding agencies, or the issues around which researchers have designed their projects, have been able to address some gaps in our knowledge more effectively than others.

Approaches to Material Culture

Boivin (2004, 66-67), citing examples from anthropology, points out how the properties of material objects can shape the form of social schemes. In a specific example, Roux *et al.* (this volume) note how changes in the form of material culture and production techniques would have impacted upon a wide range of activities including the procurement of raw materials, the organization of labour, the timing and perceived status of different activities and the range of skills and facilities required. To take another instance, the replacement of chipped stone by metal for cutting tools might be expected to have had ramifications not just for the relative values of the different materials. It would have impacted upon the relative status assigned to particular forms of labour, but also the importance of the connections through which different resources were obtained, and thus the strength and orientation of different social networks, and the relative status associated with participation in these. The infrequency with which such issues were addressed by contributors to the volume might be seen as symptomatic of the grip of the “archaeological culture”, which both sets the questions, and provides the vocabulary with which answers can be constructed.

If we seek to move away from “cultures” we will need to modify the way in which we approach artefact data, and if we wish to build regional narratives from the bottom-up, there is a need for detailed inter-site material culture studies. However, these must go beyond simple typological comparisons, and assemble and interpret the variable evidence for matters of manufacture, context, and consumption. We need to understand the spatial and chronological extents of specific artefact styles, but also how this is expressed in terms of raw materials and technology in different contexts. This does not mean, however, that we should produce only the occasional definitive study, accompanied by a massive *corpus*. Rather, we require a continuing, and flexible engagement with the evidence, as it is such information that will allow us begin to investigate the networks of knowledge and communication which underpinned much past behaviour. The need to interpret past societies through the medium of their objects requires us to consider the cultural logic which brought these remains into being, a point expounded many years ago by Shanks and Tilley (1987) among others. Jones (2002, 25) has argued that a potentially useful way to do this is by “tacking back and forth between the material evidence and our theoretically informed notions of how human society is reproduced, ---- and to thus develop a web of meaning, building-up connections and networks of significance between objects and concepts and practices”.

This might indeed be a useful way to move forward, as even where striking and spatially extensive similarities are evident in the material record, attempts to consider their significance remain few. Spatially extensive networks for the circulation of items of material culture (and probably other things too) clearly existed (Commence 2006; Roux *et al.* this volume; Rutter and Philip 2008). These have generally been discussed in terms of prestige goods and craft specialists, with reference to concepts drawn from the general anthropological literature (Kerner 2001; Levy, 1986, 1995). However, such explanations sit rather uncomfortably with the apparent absence of such material in many

parts of the region (Bourke 2008, 137). Not only do the spatial extents of the various networks remain poorly defined, we have little understanding of the significance of the *specific* subset of material which circulated within them, even though these may have been of great importance to the communities involved. The lack of attention to these matters may reflect the belief that normative cultures are based upon shared ideas, and that as Johnson (1999, 65) points out, once the existence of particular culture is accepted, its specific form and its continued reproduction in that form need no further explanation.

One of the most debilitating aspects of ceramic studies in the southern Levant has been the tendency to focus analysis upon shape typology and decoration, the primacy of which was established at a time in which ceramics provided the main basis for chronological assignment (e.g. Albright 1932, Wright 1937). However, a wide range of approaches are now available through which material culture assemblages can be assessed and compared (Chilton ed. 1999), and this without recourse to over-generalised concepts such as “specialisation” (Dessel and Joffe 2000, 48).

Ways in which the ceramic data might be used to consider inter-community relationships at moderate spatial scales have been explored by Roux *et al* (this volume) and Burton and Levy (this volume). The latter seek to comprehend change among sites in a particular sub-region, by mapping quantified ceramic data against a radiometric dating framework. The aim is to compare material culture assemblages – mainly ceramics – between sites and to investigate to what extent patterns of similarity and difference can be attributed to chronology, physical distance, and inter-community connectivity. While the greater use of quantified material culture studies is to be encouraged, this does raise the issues of sample size, and also the quality and comparability of contexts. Sherd material from contexts such as domestic middens can provide valuable evidence on ways in which material culture was mobilised and consumed as an aspect of routine household practices (Chesson 2000, 366). However, despite an extensive literature on the subject in American archaeology in particular (e.g. Schiffer 1987), the relationship – in particular in quantified terms - between refuse deposits and “living” household assemblages remains poorly understood in Levantine archaeology.

Communities of Practice

There has been growing understanding within the social sciences in recent years that what Giddens (1984) has termed the “practical consciousness” which informs peoples daily routines is key to comprehending the ways in which people both constructed, and were in turn shaped by, their social and material worlds (Gosselain 1999, 2000; Hodder and Cessford 2004). The techno-petrographic approach employed by Roux *et al.* (this volume) draws upon such practice-based approaches. The former focus upon manufacturing processes, and the sequence of actions known as the “*châînes-opératoires*”, (Lemonnier 1993) which allows them to address the relationship between people and objects through the way they are produced, the selection and acquisition of raw materials, manufacturing techniques and the social relations that underlie their production. Because of the socialised nature of learning, the transmission of technical tasks associated with the acquisition of particular

bodily techniques, is believed to encapsulate important symbolic considerations (Dobres 2000), and thus allow the identification of what Lave and Wenger (1998) term “communities of practice”. These are groups of people who share a common interest and learn how to further this more effectively through regular interaction — although learning may be an incidental outcome that accompanies other social processes.

The value of this approach is that it provides a means to assess the structure of the ceramic assemblage from Abu Hamid, by providing data on the diversity of fabrics, their likely provenance and the relationships between vessel form, petrography and technical procedures. While the case-study examines temporal change at Abu Hamid, the method also offers a way in which assemblages from different sites can be compared across many dimensions: the physical distribution of vessels, the transmission of practical knowledge, the organizational dynamics of production and acquisition and the variable relationships between different components of sites’ ceramic assemblages.

The complexity of ceramic procurement evidenced at Abu Hamid Phase II (Roux *et al* this volume), indicates the risks inherent in assuming as a default option, that the assemblage from a single site is, by and large, of local production. It demonstrates that the ceramic assemblage from a particular site should not be treated as a unified package diagnostic of a “culture” but as componential and highly contingent. Such complex systems of ceramic consumption might well account for the diversity apparent in Late Neolithic / Early Chalcolithic ceramic assemblages in the region, confirming the view that bounded and homogenous ceramic regions, when these exist, require specific explanation (Philip and Baird 2000, 22).

Using this approach it is possible to assess the nature of individual assemblages and their relationships to both earlier practices in that locality, and wider communities of practice. By showing that the ceramics from Abu Hamid Level III belong to a different, technologically more homogenous and spatially more extensive tradition than their predecessors (Roux *et al* this volume), it is possible to argue for the development by the mid-5th millennium cal BC, of widespread communities of practice in the sphere of ceramic production. This is almost certainly one of the elements which underlies what has been termed the “Ghassulian culture”. The value of a technological approach is further underscored by Braun’s (this volume) revealing observation that despite certain changes of vessel form, early EB I ceramic production was in many respects, a de-skilled version of Chalcolithic technology.

The Object

Another area of interest is the way that we approach artefacts themselves, a discussion that might usefully draw upon recent work on materiality. One useful development from our standpoint has been the understanding that the assignation of the meaning of an artefact is not fixed, once and for all, but is created to some extent by context. What this implies is that while things are bound-up within human affairs, in turn, people use objects to create and

structure social relations. Thus the archaeological record is composed of objects whose relationships with people, and with other artefacts, are changing constantly according to the contexts within which they are being used and thus understood or interpreted. In this light, meanings are rarely “received” but are constantly remade through practice, what has been “the materialization of culture” (DeMarrais 2004, 11-12), in effect the way in which objects intervene in social relationships. As material culture is embedded in shared practices and understandings, webs of interaction between the social and the material are generated, creating elements of coherence which we can detect through archaeology.

A simple example would be the way in which the shaping of small lumps of clay into crude representations of animals, allowed these to perform a role in rituals associated with hunting (Freikman and Garfinkel 2009), in effect forming a link between the hopes and desires of would-be hunters and the spirits. Of course, other situations will be more complex, with artefacts exchanged between people and thus coming to represent specific relationships or events. As objects may be exchanged a number of times they thus come to carry a complex range of memories and associations – in effect a biography. In this way, two superficially similar items may come to have very different meanings, and thus to intercede quite differently in the field of human actions. It is probably worth exploring how these ideas might be developed in the context of the data from the southern Levant.

When we consider exchange networks, we need to consider not just the familiar broad-scale patterns: we must also examine microscalar evidence for local consumption practices (Bradley and Edmonds 1993). A case in point is the basalt vessels which occur at numerous sites in the southern Levant in the Chalcolithic and the EB I periods (Braun 1990; Rowan *et al.* 1999). It is hard to identify a particular task that could *only* have been undertaken (in a strictly functional sense) using a basalt vessel, rather than one made in wood, pottery or some locally available stone. Therefore, it is clear from the outset that the significance of basalt vessels is almost certainly bound up with a complex understanding of materials in which “value” or “significance” would have been influenced by factors such as availability, place of origin, the human relationships involved in their acquisition or transmission, and local traditions regarding matters of “appropriateness”.

To focus upon the situation in EB I in particular, Schaub (2008, 279-282) has observed that the majority of vessels from Bab edh-Dhra’ belong to a single type, and that in contrast to the wider regional pattern, these were found in mortuary rather than settlement contexts. Moreover, while vessels from sites elsewhere in the southern Levant were generally made using raw materials from sources located in North Jordan or the Jaulan, examples from the southern Ghor appear to have been sourced mainly from local basalt outcrops on the Kerak plateau (Philip and Williams-Thorpe 1993, 2001; Rutter *et al.* 2003). In a study of stone axes in the British Neolithic, Bradley (2000, 86) has argued that in addition to the functional properties of the rock, a range of social factors also contributed to the choice of axe source, and there is evidence to suggest that place of origin may have been an important element

in the past categorisation of material culture (Arnold 1971, 27; Bradley and Edmonds 1993). In this light, it is not unlikely that the source of basalt vessels may have influenced their perceived qualities and associations, thus contributing to their creation of a distinct “identity”.

Thus while basalt vessels are widely distributed across the southern Levant during both the Chalcolithic and EB I periods, the combined evidence of context and geochemistry indicates the existence of quite specific practices at Bab edh-Dhra' during the EB I period, and which were presumably embedded within a localised knowledge system. This is exactly the kind of information that can be obscured by large-scale studies of the kind that presume the existence of both an integrated distribution network, and a universal system of meaning.

An approach of this type might have potentially interesting implications for our understanding of aspects of Chalcolithic period metal artefacts, in particular those produced using complex ternary alloys, and which generally appear in distinctive forms (Levy and Shalev 1989, 355-359; Shalev 1999; Shalev and Northover 1993; Tadmor *et al.* 1995). It is generally believed that these artefacts moved through prestige exchange networks of some sort (Kerner 2001; Levy 1986, 1995), and would therefore have been closely involved in shaping social relations and social reproduction. To accept this, however, is not to suggest that the significance of these objects remained the same at all times. As Shugar and Gohm (this volume) demonstrate, examples have been recovered from various places and contexts, including burials, settlements, and a large hoard at Nahal Mishmar, which included both complete and fragmentary pieces.

Working with data from the Copper Age of south-east Europe John Chapman (2000, 99-104) has suggested a new way of understanding the use and deposition of metal objects, among other categories of artefact. He argues (Chapman 2000, 5) for “the creation, maintenance and development of social relations through the enchainment and accumulation of personalised objects”. As I read it, by enchainment he means that two individuals wishing to establish some form of social relationship, agree on a specific artefact appropriate to that particular relationship and break it into two or more parts, with each participant in the relationship retaining a part as a marker of the relationship. Parts may be further divided in the process of the establishment of different relationships, or passed on to a different person, and are kept separate until such time as the relationship is reconstituted. In this way items of material culture or parts thereof, come to materialize relationships between people.

He also suggests that what are often termed ‘hoards’, might be connected to the notion of the fragmentation of ‘sets’ of artefacts (Chapman 2000, 46-47). According to this scheme, sets are seen as integrally related groups of individual elements. These too can be enchainment, but not as fragments of an artefact, but as individual elements drawn from a set. However, hoards, particularly in the case of valuable materials such as metal, may also indicate the development of a different concept, that of status gained through

accumulation (Chapman 2000, 130), and underscores the notion that an object derives meaning from form, material and context. As the notion of enchainment can be applied to fragments, individual objects, and groups or sets of artefacts, this may provide us with a new framework through which we might not only to consider Chalcolithic metalwork, but also revisit various elements of material culture, including those which are loosely grouped under the heading “prestige goods”.

The significance of these artefacts is likely to have varied according to context, with a particular object valued and understood differently when in circulation and when in the possession of a specific individual or group. In addition, the meaning assigned to specific artefacts may have varied in according to shifts in the way in which different parts of the human age-gender life course were constructed and represented (Sofaer Deverinski 2000, 401). Value may have been further distinguished depending upon whether the object was in the possession of a named individual, formed part of a hoard, or was associated with the dead – i.e. within a tomb. In fact, the prominence of “secondary interments” a practice which required regular access to burial places, for among other things the manipulation and structured deposition of human remains (Chesson 2007, 117; Joffe 2003), might suggest that objects associated with the dead could have taken part in social transactions, including their movement back to the world of the living. In short, rather than visualizing a single class of “prestige” metalwork, we might do better to view it as a material resource deployed flexibly according to specific needs and circumstances. Finally, the potential for metal artefacts to be recycled gives them a very different notion of “value”, perhaps even a different construction of materiality from contemporary artefacts made from materials like stone and ivory. In short, the evidential value of artefacts is maximized, not when they are considered as cultural indicators, or “type-fossils” but when they are treated as material resources which could be deployed actively within various fields of practice.

The distinctive “ladder” burials identified at Ashqelon *Barnea* have encouraged Golani and Nagar (this volume) to try to identify the source of an immigrant group. However, using a practice-based approach, one might look beyond formal similarities and differences to consider how changes in burial might indicate the transformation of cultural practices to reflect new social or organizational principles, given the specific material resources available within the landscape of the coastal plain. Superficially at least, these cemeteries appear very different from “typical” late EB I cave burials in the region, those from Azor (Ben Tor 1975) for example. Philip has suggested (2008, 209-210) that one of the key differences between Chalcolithic and EB I societies was the replacement of portable artefacts as sources of power, by agricultural products, the generation of which rested upon access to land, water and labour. As such, the multiple successive burials of the EBA have been interpreted as a materialization of the kinship groups (Chesson 2003, 2007; Philip 2003; 2008) which are believed to have underpinned rights to land and to have constituted the basis of extra-household labour units.

Viewed in this light, the linked chains of adult burials documented at Ashqelon *Barnea* (Golani and Nagar this volume) might be understood as representing a formative stage in the materialization of kinship, expressed in a form that was compatible with the material affordances of the coastal plain. It is interesting to note therefore, that the nineteen interments spread over ten cists included within the ladder is broadly consistent with the maximum number of individuals interred within any single EB I tomb at Bab edh-Dhra' - Tomb A 71 with 19 burials (see Schaub and Rast 1989, 183, Table 4, 233; Table 10 for details). Also of note is the fact that in some cases the built stone burial structures which occur in various parts of the southern Levant (and the parallels to which are noted by Golani and Nagar this volume), are linked by low walls running between individual structures (Mortensen and Thuesen 2004, 109-110; Swauger 1966; 106-107), suggesting that individual burial receptacles were linked to some kind of larger burial landscape.

Equally, there has been little consideration of the way in which societies reproduce themselves, through the operation of social memory, although the issue has been explored in both Neolithic and EBA contexts (Chesson 1999, 2001, 2007; Kuijt 2008). Work on mortuary practices in the British Neolithic and in the Balkans (e.g. Chapman 2000, 144-145; Fowler 2002) raises the possibility that the carefully managed disarticulated remains which are found in many Chalcolithic and EB I burials, might point to the dead human body having played a role in the mediation of social relations. In fact, it is quite possible that the disarticulation and selective curation evident in the EB I burials at Bab edh-Dhra', for example (Chesson 2007, 117-118), echoes anthropological and archaeological evidence for skeletal remains remaining actively involved in the world of the living (Campbell *et al.* 2003, 123-124; Kansa and Campbell 2004).

4. Concluding thoughts

Rowan and Lovell (this volume) remark that "culture history is the platform upon which current archaeological research [in the southern Levant] is played out". I have sought to indicate above how the continuing central position of "cultures" works to deny space to alternative approaches. As a result, the later prehistory of the southern Levant has remained relatively insular as a research field, and has not always been able to address effectively the kind of research questions that are of interest to wider scholarship. While Bintliff (2008, 162) wisely cautions against the tendency to view "the development of archaeological theory in stadial evolutionary terms, with the replacement of misguided approaches by superior ones on a generational or decadal level", I believe that in this case there is a genuine need for change, and that this cannot simply be dismissed as bending to current academic fashion.

I am aware that not all of the participants at the Madrid meeting will agree with my remarks. Some, I know, share many of my interests and concerns, some will find parts of value, while others will disagree strongly: divergence of views is appropriate in an academic discipline. It is, of course, highly desirable that regional specialists should seek to build the depth of the dataset, by the collection, analysis and publication of new evidence and by detailed comparative analysis. However, I have suggested above that the way in

which this is done has a greater impact upon the wider utility of that evidence than has generally been acknowledged.

Wengrow observes (2006, 194) that in much of the western scholarly tradition the ancient Middle East tends to be presented as a stage in global history — surely a perfect example of the suppression of difference to create a macroscale narrative. As a result, the Middle East has not always been considered as consisting of separate places, each with a distinctive temporal development and encompassing multiple trajectories of social and cultural change. In fact, the later prehistory of the southern Levant provides an excellent instance of a very distinct regional trajectory, one that differs in many respects from those documented for both north and south Mesopotamia (Greenberg 2002, 2-3; Joffe 1993, 58-61; Philip 2008, 161-166). That this is so appears, at least to me, to offer a way to develop research questions that will interest not only those already working in the region, but a significant swathe of the wider research community. In this way, the later prehistory of the southern Levant could make an important contribution to wider debates, thus raise its profile within the discipline, and, one might hope, see an increase in the flow of research funds.

However if we are to capitalize on this opportunity, there must be some reorientation within Levantine prehistory. While disputes over definitions and units of analysis will never go away, in-part because they refer to real issues, we must also make a greater effort to ask the kind of questions which are likely to be of interest to a wider section of the discipline. Data of the quantity and quality of that from the southern Levant is exactly what is needed in order to facilitate the exploration of alternative narrative. However, this will require researchers to address the evidence using concepts that are meaningful to scholars working in other areas, and to frame their discussion around topics of broad and current interest. This will constitute a significant challenge as it will require a degree of change in both research priorities and practices, although the potential rewards could be substantial.

Notes

1. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Andrew Millard for his helpful advice on the averaging of radiocarbon dates.

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